

Why did the Ottomans besiege Malta in 1565?

Emanuel Buttigieg & Catherine Tabone

Introduction

The January 2007 front-cover of the popular magazine *History Today* carried the catchy title 'Keeping Turkey out of Europe'.¹ It was a clever editorial tactic that was meant to play upon its readers' sensibilities with regards to Turkish membership of the European Union, while creating a link with the Great Siege of 1565. This publication is one of the latest in a long chain of such narratives that are inspired by this epic tale of violence, religion and heroism.² Identifying the motives that led the Ottomans to besiege Malta is analogous to the analysis of an intricate work of tapestry. It is never easy to undertake the analysis of an event through the eyes of someone else, especially if the 'Other' is essentially different from you. To look at the Siege of 1565 from the Ottomans' point of view, and to gain an understanding of their motives, is an exercise in jumping the fence. One has to try to move beyond the categories of 'Maltese', 'Christian' and 'victors' (which ideas are ingrained in practically every Maltese from the most tender age), to the state of mind of 'Ottoman', 'Muslim', and 'the vanquished'. An understanding of Hospitaller Malta is intimately tied to an understanding of the Ottoman Empire, its sworn enemy, and its reason for existence, at one and the same time. Finally, this is made more difficult by the fact that Ottoman archives have not been open to researchers for quite a long time and even now there is a whole set of logistical problems, especially the archaic language of the documents, which even modern Turkish researchers find difficult.³

The Mediterranean was the arena where a constant struggle between two great Empires – Spanish and Ottoman – unfolded. Both Empires were structured on strong religious foundations. In the East lay the Ottoman Empire under Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566), sprawling over the Balkan Peninsula,



Two stamps from a set issued in 1965 to commemorate 400 years from the Great Siege of Malta designed by Chev. Emvin Cremona - the Turkish army arrives in Malta (top) and the Maltese forces fighting during one of the battles of the Siege (bottom)

Asia Minor and most of the Arab world. In the West lay the Spanish Empire under Philip II (1527-1598): "The two halves of the sea each supported its own system of trade rivalry and conquest".⁴ Against this backdrop, Malta featured quite predominantly in the

1 See the front-cover of *History Today*, 57/1 (2007) and the article by T. Rothman, 'The Great Siege of Malta', 12-9.

2 On the many accounts and books that deal with the Great Siege of Malta see S.C. Spiteri, *The Great Siege: Knights vs Turks mdxxv* (Malta, 2005), 'Introduction'. This book is the most detailed modern analysis of the military aspects of the Siege. For some recent important insights into the Great Siege see the various contributions in G. Cassar (ed.), *The Great Siege 1565: Separating Fact from Fiction* (Malta, 2005).

3 A. Cassola (ed.), *The 1565 Ottoman Malta Campaign Register* (Malta, 1998), 11.

4 P. Padfield, *Tide of Empire: Decisive Naval Campaigns in the Rise of the West. Vol.1. 1481-1654* (London, 1979), 87, as cited in V. Mallia-Milanes & L.J. Scerri (eds.), *An Uneasy Partnership: Malta 1530-1565* (Malta, 1985), 20.

Table 1

1480:	Ottoman conquest of Otranto (until 1481)
1492:	Fall of Muslim Granada to Spain
1497:	Spanish conquest of Melilla
1505:	Spanish conquest of Mers el-Kebir
1509:	Spanish conquest of Oran
1510:	Spanish conquest of Rock of Algiers, Bougie and Tripoli
1514:	Ottoman conquest of Jalil and Mahdiya
1516-17:	Ottoman conquest of Algiers
1522:	Ottoman conquest of Hospitaller Rhodes
1526:	Ottoman capture of Capo Passero in Sicily (held for a short period)
1534:	Ottoman conquest of Tunis
1535:	Spanish conquest of Tunis
1537:	Ottoman landings in Otranto
1538:	Ottoman naval victory over combined Christian forces at Prevesa
1551:	Ottoman landings in Malta and Gozo, followed by conquest of Hospitaller Tripoli
1555:	Ottoman conquest of Bougie (Algeria)
1557:	Ottoman landings in the Gulf of Taranto and Puglia
1558:	Ottoman landings at the Strait of Messina, Amalfi, Gulf of Salerno, Torre del Greco, Tuscany, Piombino and Spain
1560:	Ottoman conquest of Djerba; landings in Gozo, Sicily, Puglia and Abruzzi
1563:	Spanish repulsion of Ottoman siege of Mers el-Kebir
1564:	Spanish conquest of Peñon de Velez
1565:	Great Siege of Malta
1571:	Christian naval victory over the Ottomans at the Battle of Lepanto
1574:	Ottoman conquest of Tunis and La Goulette

Mediterranean order of things. Its position between Italy and Africa made it the object of dispute between Christians and Muslims, particularly as pressure intensified from both sides to assert effective control over North Africa along the course of the sixteenth century.⁵ Hence, the Great Siege of Malta of 1565 can only make sense and be properly appreciated when it is viewed as part of a chain of conflicts stretching from the late fifteenth century to the third quarter of the sixteenth⁶ (see Table 1).

Such a list is not meant to be exhaustive or complete, but it does hammer in the point that the Siege of 1565 was part of a wider palimpsest of conflicts across the Western-Central Mediterranean region. These engagements tended to be characterized by a high level of volatility in terms of their achievements: nothing could be taken for granted because what was conquered today could easily be lost tomorrow. There has tended to be an assumption that if Malta had

fallen into Ottoman hands, it would have done so for good. However, such a supposition – theoretical as it may be – does not hold sway when considered within this pattern of warfare. Moreover, the need of the Ottomans to have Malta as a base from which to attack southern Europe is reduced – though not completely discounted – when one observes the regularity with which incursions into European territories occurred. Between 1543 and 1544 the Ottoman fleet was even able to drop anchor in the harbour of Toulon.⁷ Hence, the reasons that determined the sizeable Ottoman investment in the Siege of Malta are to be found in the interstices between the short-term and long-term factors that shaped Ottoman policies and Christian-Muslim relations in the Mediterranean.

Long-term factors

The Ottoman Turks rose as warriors in the Anatolian marches of the decaying Byzantine Empire. Their

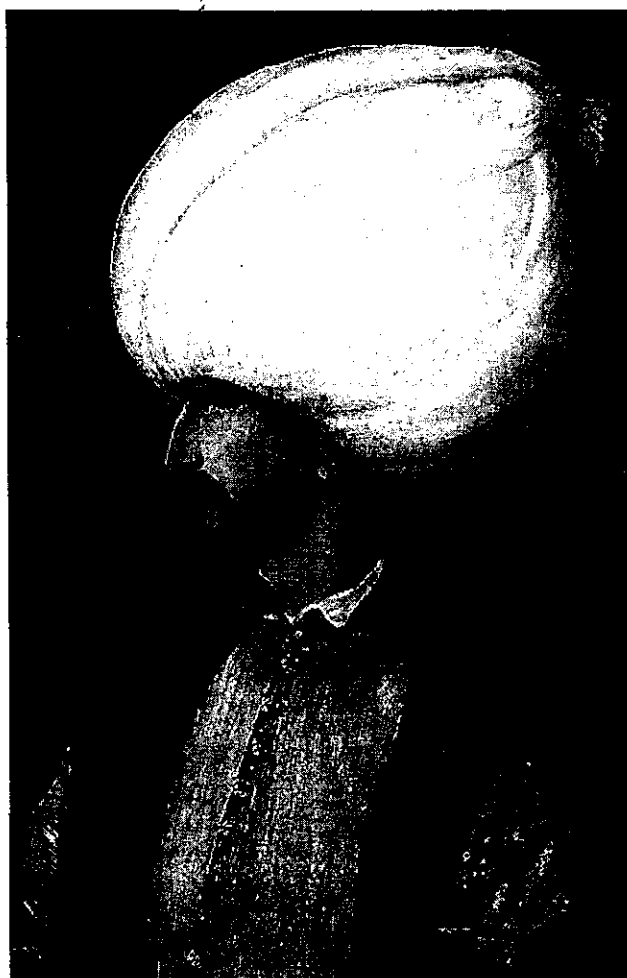
5 J. Riley-Smith, *Hospitallers: The History of the Order of St John* (London, 1999), 106.

6 List compiled from F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, ii (Berkeley, Calif., 1995; first edn. 1949; second edn. 1966), 967; Riley-Smith, 106-7; D. Cutajar & C. Cassar, 'Malta and the Sixteenth Century Struggle for the Mediterranean', in Cassar (ed.), *The Great Siege 1565...*, 1-34; List of Ottoman sieges and landings from the fourteenth century to World War One, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Ottoman_sieges_and_landings [last accessed 4.v.2008].

7 J.R. Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe 1450-1620* (Stroud, 1998; first published London, 1985), 16.

leaders, the sultans, adopted a *gaza* (Holy War) dogma as the cornerstone of their identity and they extended the concept of *gaza* to bring the whole Islamic world under their protection.⁸ The claims to universal empire by the Ottomans had their foundation in the will of God, but they were also based on the concept of the justice of conquest. God had imposed on Muslims the duty to propagate Islam and the Koran adjured believers "not [to] think that those who were slain in the cause of Allah are dead. They are alive and well provided for by Allah..."⁹ Therefore, warfare was a central organising principle in Ottoman society and politics. The core of the Turkish army was composed of the Janissaries and Sipahis of the Porte – an elite group of highly trained and effective soldiers and cavalrymen. However, the bulk of the regular army was formed from holders of the *timars* (military fiefs), who had either to serve personally or provide a number of horsemen according to the size of the fief. In contrast to feudalism in Europe, these fiefs were not hereditary in the holder's family, but were redistributed after the holder's death. In consequence, this class had a vested interest in constantly pushing the frontiers of the empire outwards in order to provide more land and *timars* for distribution. In particular, those holding *timars* on the islands of the Aegean served in the Ottoman navy.¹⁰ The Maltese islands would have probably fitted well within this system, thereby placing them in the logic of Ottoman conquest and sustenance.

In early modern times, religion, politics and war were in effect a continuum rather than constituting separate spheres. It is therefore both difficult and somewhat anachronistic to try to split these up when analysing the factors that led to the Siege of 1565. Sultan Suleiman I seems to have harboured a deep antipathy for Emperor Charles V (1500-1558). He refused to recognize the latter's right to the title of emperor, acknowledging him only as King of Spain, and encouraged any force which opposed Charles' claim to sovereignty over the whole of western Christendom.¹¹ In fact, according to Elton "... Ottoman imperialism was probably the largest single factor in the consolidation and legitimisation of Protestant Lutheranism and after 1526 all the major concessions to it were connected with Ottoman activities in eastern and central Europe".¹² Contemporary sources portray Suleiman as a religious and conscientious man. According to a Greek knight



Suleiman the Magnificent, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire (Painting attributed to Titian c.1530)

and spy in Constantinople, Suleiman's favourite wife never ceased inciting her husband and urging the Ulemas to impress upon him that the total destruction of Malta was a matter of conscience, because the ships of the Order interfered with the pilgrimages to the tomb of the Prophet at Mecca.¹³ The Imam of the Great Mosque reminded the Sultan that the dungeons of Malta were full of Turkish captives whilst other sons of the Prophet were being lashed to the benches of Christian galleys to work on these sea craft which raided the sea routes of his own Empire. "It is only thy unconquerable sword", the Imam cried, "... that can break the chains of these poor creatures, subjects of thine, whose cries rise to heaven and afflict the ears of the Prophet himself... all of them wait... upon thy justice and power, and thy vengeance upon their enemies – their implacable enemies who are thine also".¹⁴

8 H. Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire - The Classical Age 1300 - 1600* (London, 1973), 57.

9 G.Q. Bowler, H.G. Koenigsberger & G.L. Mosse, *Europe in the Sixteenth Century* (2nd edn., London, 1989), 242.

10 Bowler et al., 246; J.H. Kramers, 'Sulaiman I', in M.T. Houtsma et al. (eds.), *First Encyclopedia of Islam 1913 - 1936*, ii (Leiden, 1987; reprint of 1st edn.), 525.

11 Inalcik, 58.

12 As quoted in J.M. Rogers & R.M. Ward, *Suleyman the Magnificent* (London, 1988), 6.

13 F. Balbi di Correggio, *The Siege of Malta 1565*, (trans. Copenhagen, 1961), 32.

14 E. Bradford, *The Shield and the Sword: The Knights of Malta* (UK, 1972), 145.

Short-term factors

Having considered these long-term factors or patterns, it is necessary to identify what the short-term issues were which, within these wider parameters, brought events to a head. The decision to launch an attack – when and where – was determined both by the choices of the key persons holding some form of political sway at the time, and by broader social and environmental dynamics. The timing of the Ottoman thrust was embedded in the rhythm of Mediterranean sea-warfare, the logic of which may have been more apparent to sixteenth-century combatants than to modern historians; thus, on all sides there seems to have been the expectation that 1565 would see a showdown. As for the target of the Ottomans' attack, Malta was, logistically, the furthest land which a massive naval squadron or fleet launched from Constantinople could effectively assail.¹⁵

The primary objective of Suleiman was to dislodge the Hospitallers from Malta because of the great damage that was being done to Ottoman shipping.¹⁶ The decision to attack Malta was taken on 6 October 1564. Richard Knolles recorded Suleiman's speech to his war council. It is not a verbatim report but it expresses the motives of the Turkish campaign against Malta: "You yourselves-daily hear the pitiful complaints of our subjects and merchants, whom the Maltese, I say not soldiers, but pirates ... spoil and make prizes of, whose injuries to revenge, all laws but of God and men do require".¹⁷ The importance of securing Ottoman shipping lines is heightened when one keeps present the vitality of the yearly Alexandria-Istanbul caravan to the Ottoman economy and how its disturbance affected adversely the Porte's finances. Moreover, the audacious exploits of many knights in the waters of the Greek islands further infuriated Suleiman.¹⁸

In Knolles' book we find that the chief instigators were Cassenes, son of Barbarossa and King of Algiers, and Dragut, Governor of Tripoli, both of whom had their own reasons for wanting to deal a shattering blow to the Order who was harassing their territories



Ottoman Janissaries attacking the Knights in another siege against the Order of St John - the Siege of Rhodes, 1522

and disrupting their maritime trade.¹⁹ Braudel also points out how the presence of the Knights in Malta and Tripoli was a constant threat to the vital line of communications with Barbary. It was essential to halt the Knight's transfer from Malta to Tripoli; which they in fact did. It was thus logical that the next target would be Malta.²⁰ However, beneath this immediate aim, the inspiration of *gaza* and the need of new land to keep the *timar* system going, were also crucial factors. Thus, the attack on Malta in 1565 was deeply embedded in the wider framework of how the Ottoman Empire functioned. Then, when the Hospitallers scored a number of high-profile naval successes in the months before the Siege of 1565 – which included the enslavement of prominent figures such as an important Ottoman lady and the Sanjazz-Bey of Alexandria, and the capture of rich cargoes – this only hardened the resolve of the Ottomans to attack.²¹

Suleiman – a life-long conqueror – seems to have viewed the subjugation of Malta as part of a wider

15 J. F. Guilmartin jr, *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1974), 176-8.

16 V. Mallia-Milanes, 'Frà Jean de La Valette 1495 – 1568: A Reappraisal', in T. Cortis (ed.), *The Maltese Cross* (Malta, 1995), 124.

17 J. Galea, 'The Great Siege of Malta from a Turkish Point of View', *Melita Historica*, iv/2 (1965), 112.

18 Bradford, 141.

19 Galea; Riley-Smith, 108; R. Abbé de Vertot, *The History of the Knights of Malta* (London, 1728), [Malta, 1989], ii, 190.

20 Braudel, *The Mediterranean ...*, 918-9, 1014.

21 On the controversy over the identity of this prominent lady see Balbi di Correggio, 31. See also A. Cassola, *The 1565 Great Siege of Malta and Hipólito Sans's 'La Maltea'* (Malta, 1999), 75: In Hipólito Sans's poem *La Maltea* this woman, Giansevere, whom Romegas took back as prisoner to Malta, is described as "Y truxo assi con el a Malta presa/ una nobile señora poderosa, llamada Giansevere, de la mesa/de Solyman partícipe copiosa" [Canto I, f.II.r.]. Hence, these verses suggest that she was the Sultan's lover. However, in Balbi's account of the Greek Knight's report, Giansevere is a hundred years old, which practically eradicates the possibility of her being Suleiman's lover. It seems more plausible that she was Ali Pasha's aunt or the nurse of his favourite wife. On the other losses suffered by Ottoman shipping, cf. Bradford, 142.

plan involving the whole of Italy: "It is my great desire to capture Malta not for its own sake, but because of other and greater enterprises which will follow this expedition if it be successful".²² A 'domino theory', to borrow a Cold War phrase, can be applied to Ottoman expansion. Being primarily a land-power, it expanded in this way, in a domino-like fashion, until it found strong points like Vienna and Malta, which halted its expansion in Europe. The empire had reached its limits. At thousands of kilometres from its base the mighty Ottoman army could be held up for vital weeks by the determined resistance of a small fortress like Malta.²³ On the other hand, the amount of documentation in Istanbul about the siege does not justify the idea that the Great Siege was more extraordinary than any other Ottoman military campaign. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the importance given to it at the time by Suleiman who chose some of the best men to lead the expedition, such as Mustapha as Commander of the Army, Piali as Commander of the Fleet, and Dragut; though the first two proved incapable of working together. The expeditionary force assembled was huge and it included a third of the Janissary corps. Just a glimpse at one detail – some 60,000 bullets were shot by the Ottomans at the defenders – gives an indication of the size of the enemy sent against Malta.²⁴

The speedy arrival in Malta of the Ottoman fleet on 18 May 1565 "hit Europe like a hurricane" whose consequences made it one of the great events of the century.²⁵ The Great Siege of Malta has been hailed as "the Verdun of the sixteenth century", "the Stalingrad of its age" and "one of the three greatest events of the century".²⁶ Voltaire even said that "nothing is more famous in history than the Siege of Malta".²⁷ That the Siege acquired such magnitude is more a testimony to the effectiveness of the Order in promoting its victory, than to its actual long-term impact on Mediterranean and European developments. A multitude of poems in Latin and in vernacular languages were composed and published in praise of the Knights. One poem described how "The Soldiers of CHRIST, who are also his sons; voluntarily opened up their hearts to receive death".²⁸ There were also many publications that combined



**The Monument commemorating
the Great Siege of Malta found in modern day
Republic Street in Valletta -
a symbol of Maltese unity and patriotism**

cartographic and other elements that helped to spread even further knowledge about the Hospitallers' victory; these formed part of the wider genre of 'war-news' that was so popular across Europe.²⁹ Through a combination of textual and pictorial mediums the Hospitallers forged an impressive and lasting legacy of themselves

22 Balbi di Correggio, 35.

23 Cf. Bowler et al., 247.

24 F. Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life 1400 - 1800* (London, 1973), 294-5.

25 Braudel, *The Mediterranean ...*, 1014.

26 J. Godechot, *Histoire de Malte* (Paris, 1962), 45; M. Fontenay, 'Le développement urbain du port de Malte du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle', in REMMM, 71 [Le carrefour maltais], (1994) 1, 96; Braudel, *La Méditerranée ...*, 319. These three references are as cited in A. Brogini, *Malte, Frontière de Chrétienté (1530-1670)* (Rome, 2006), 176.

27 G. Scarabelli, *Catalogue of the Records of the Order of St John of Jerusalem in the National Library of Malta - Volume XIII Archives 1952-1953* (Rome, 2004), 104, n.41.

28 A. Boselli, 'Poesie latine e italiane per l'assedio di Malta', in *Archivum Melitense*, i/1 (1910), 79: "I Militi di CHRISTO, e figli suoi; Aprirono a morte voluntaria i cuori".

29 T. Vella, 'The 1565 Great Siege Frescoes in the Palace, Valletta', in M. Camilleri & T. Vella (eds.), *Celebratio Amicitiae: Essays in Honour of Giovanni Bonello* (Malta, 2006), 193-205.

as defenders of Europe and martyrs of the faith. Their emphasis on martyrdom fitted within a wider European context of an age characterised by religious wars and missionary activity, which in turn made martyrdom as an iconographical subject very popular.³⁰

Conclusion

The Ottoman siege of Malta was primarily concerned with dislodging the Hospitallers to halt their maritime activities and not with the conquest of Malta itself. It was also intimately tied to Suleiman's personal inclination to conclude what he perceived to be the unfinished business of Rhodes in 1522. With the demise of Suleiman in 1566, different concerns came to dominate Ottoman politics as the configurations of power and interests shifted. Keeping in mind the vicissitudes of the Ottoman Empire, the roles and decisions of contemporary great men and women, and the wider socio-economic and environmental constraints within which people operated, help one to better assessed and understand the significance of why the Ottomans besieged Malta in 1565.

The defeat suffered by the Ottomans in Malta was exceptional and for Europeans living at the time, from Rome to London, it certainly felt like something good and worth celebrating.³¹ In psychological terms, Western Europe was united in fear of the Ottoman Empire that stretched from the Persian Gulf to Austria, so that its defeat in Malta was certainly welcome. However, from the long-term perspective – and quite probably soon after 1565 – it is clear that although Malta represented an epic defeat for the Ottomans, it did not curtail their power.³² In terms of the balance of power in the Mediterranean, the Siege of Malta did not particularly affect things; but as regards the Order and Malta, it signalled the commencement of a new forward-looking and confidence-filled era.³³

Just as in Maltese history 1565 is *the* 'Great Siege', so in Turkish history Suleiman is *the* 'Lawgiver', whose reign is remembered as a golden age and an absolute reference point.³⁴ The significance that 1565 still holds in the Maltese national psyche is encapsulated in the Great Siege Monument in Valletta

(inaugurated in May 1927). In spatial terms it lies at the heart of the capital city; in cultural terms the 8 September celebrations hold pride of place in the national calendar. In the wake of the UEFA Euro-2008 football match between Malta and Turkey of 8 September 2007, a number of images of Maltese supporters dressed in black shirts with the white eight-pointed cross printed on their chests appeared in various newspapers and online. Such pictures possessed an evocative feel to them as they confirm the pervasive way in which the past continues to impinge on perceptions of the present. The Great Siege of 1565 may not have been the earth-shaking event it was once thought to be, but in cultural terms its memory has proved to be a powerful moulding force in Maltese consciousness and identity.

The authors

Emanuel Buttigieg is the holder of a first class Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Malta. Since October 2004, he has been pursuing his studies at the University of Cambridge and Peterhouse. He read for an MPhil in early modern history and is now reading for a PhD on the Order of Malta, c.1580 - c.1700. His postgraduate studies have been sponsored by a number of scholarships from the Commonwealth (Cambridge) Trust, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (A.H.R.C.) and the Janatha Stubbs Foundation. His latest publication, 'Childhood and Adolescence in Early Modern Malta (1565-1632)', was published in the *Journal of Family History*, Vol.33, No.2, (2008), 139-155.

Catherine Tabone studied history at the Universities of Malta and Cambridge, specialising in religious culture and identity in early modern Malta. She currently holds the post of Curator (Anthropology) with Heritage Malta's Ethnography Section, at the Inquisitor's Palace in Vittoriosa, where her research focuses on religious material culture and intangible heritage. Her first book, entitled *Praxis Pietatis: A Historical Anthropology of Religious Culture and its Relationship with Spiritual and Secular Power in Eighteenth-Century Malta*, is to be published shortly.

30 The classic work on martyrdom in Catholic Europe was A. Gallonio, *De Sanctorum Martyrum Cruciatibus* (Cologne, 1602). Its Protestant counter-part was J. Fox, *Actes and Monuments [Book of Martyrs]*, (first edn. 1559). On the widespread appeal of the theme of martyrdom across Europe see G. A. Bailey, 'The Jesuits and Painting in Italy, 1550-1690: The Art of Catholic Reform', in F. Mormando (ed.), *Saints and Sinners: Caravaggio and the Baroque Image* (Chestnut Hill, Mass., 1999), 158; S. Ditchfield, 'An Early Christian School of Sanctity in Tridentine Rome', in S. Ditchfield (ed.), *Christianity and Community in the West: Essays for John Bossy* (Aldershot, 2001), 192-3.

31 A. Bartolo, 'The Effects of the Great Victory of Malta upon Christendom, 1565', *Archivum Melitense*, i (1910), 18-28.

32 D. MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House divided, 1490-1700* (London, 2004), 330.

33 V. Mallia-Milanes, 'The Significance of the Siege of Malta of 1565 in the long-term historical development of the Mediterranean', in P. Alberini (ed.), *Aspetti ed Attualità del Potere Marittimo in Mediterraneo nei Sec. XII-XVI* (Rome, 1999), 227-31.

34 G. Veinstein, 'Suleyman', in E. Van Donzel (ed.), *Islamic Desk Reference*, ix (Leiden & New York, 1994), 833.